

# 1776 AND ROMANS 13

Being an Historical & Theological Inquiry into the Events of 1776 and  
the Propriety of the American Revolution.



By Pastor Terry L. Reese

# 1776 and Romans 13

(Pastor Terry Reese; Valley GBC, Armagh, PA; 7/04/21)

1. A matter of lingering **controversy**: “Did our Founding Fathers violate the injunctions of Romans 13 in 1776?”
2. All agree that **in general**, we should be in **submission to ruling authorities...**  
*Rom. 13:1–2: Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed.*  
*1 Peter 2:13–14: “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.”*
3. But does that mean that **ALL political revolution** is therefore **unjustified**?
4. Some say **YES**—which, if extended, becomes the pretext behind the **Divine Right of Kings Theory** popularly advocated by Absolutist Sovereigns in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century (e.g., James I, Louis XIV).
5. Others say **NO**—specific governments **can and should be overturned**—but **general anarchy** (a clear violation of Romans 13) can *never* be advocated. Founding Father **James Otis** in a 1766 work argued that the *only* King who had any absolute “divine right” was God Himself!
6. **All** agree that **civil disobedience is required** when Caesar demands that we **sin** against the decrees and mandates of God.
7. **OT**: Daniel (Dan. 6), the 3 Holy Children (Dan. 3), the Midwives (Ex. 1) & parents of Moses (Ex. 2), Esther (Est. 5:1) & Mordecai (Est. 3:2).
8. **NT**: The Apostles (cf., Acts 4:18-20 & 5:28-29, in reference to Matt. 28:19), the Magi (Matt. 2:12).
9. Clearly, the Judges rose in revolution against **foreign occupiers & oppressors**—*but*, this was in the Theocratic context of the Promised Land, which God had clearly given unto the Hebrew People. Then there is the case of Jehoiada’s rebellion against Athaliah (2 Kings 11)—who had illegitimately usurped the Davidic Throne...
10. But what of **tyranny in general**—and the **American Revolution** in specific?
11. The American Revolution was **problematic** for many at the time (John Wesley, Loyalists, Tories, etc.), and for some respected authorities even today (e.g., Dr. John MacArthur).
12. The **Founding Fathers themselves wrestled** with this, as Christian men.
13. Such wrestling and polemic is, *in-and-of-itself*, **testimony** that the Christian Faith and the matter of their personal testimonies meant MUCH to them!
14. Often, this matter is over-simplified and broad-brushed in generalities. There were, in this case, **particular historical circumstance** involved that must be duly considered, lest we unfairly judge our Fathers...



## Various arguments in favor of the actions of the Authors of the American Revolution...

15. **Lower magistrates** who are *pledged to protect the public* must even protect their people, if necessary, from the power of the *higher Sovereign*, as various Reformers taught (e.g., Calvin).

This issue was germane to the various political upheavals attending the Protestant Reformation. With reference to the American situation, the various lawfully established Colonial governments and their attending officials constituted the role of the aforesaid “lower magistrates.”

16. Various Reformers argued that a **tyranny is not a real government** at all, but rather, an organized criminal enterprise operating in clear violation of the King’s prescribed duties as expressed in Romans 13. The Ruler is granted a sword to do “good,” and justly administer the rule of law.
17. The principle of maintaining the just **rule of law** *implies* the right to rebel and replace the government if the Ruler *himself* is found to be a source of habitual *lawlessness*.
18. Under the **Framers’ understanding of Romans 13**, the Revolution was *not* an act of anarchy or rebellion; rather it was an act of resistance to a government that violated the express Biblical purposes for which God had ordained civil government in the first place.
19. **The Declaration of Independence** makes a point that the Colonies were **long patient** (approximately a dozen years) with the Crown, which ignored their just grievances & lawful petitions, as well as the actions of their legitimately convened colonial legislatures, and which ultimately physically **attacked** the Colonies with brute force—even ignoring the “Olive Branch Petition” of 1775.
20. **British outrages** included the massive influxes of troops, home invasion & the quartering of troops (note the 3<sup>rd</sup> Amendment of the US Constitution), etc.—all which stood in violation of Britain’s own legal heritage (e.g., British Common Law, the English Bill of Rights, the Magna Carta, etc).
21. Further, the Declaration of Independence makes it clear that they were not acting as **individuals**, or **anarchists**, but as “*Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress, assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions.*”
22. The conflict was thus seen by our Fathers as a **government vs. government conflict**—and was therefore often labelled a *civil war*, rather than a *revolution* (terminology that came into general use at a later date).
23. **The violence of the Revolution was not initiated by the Colonies.** This was a Key point and ethical concern, in the minds of the Founders. The Revolution was regarded by them as a **defensive** war, as opposed to an **offensive** one. One may lawfully protect one’s life, family, property, and way-of-life against organized acts of violence!

24. **Lexington: “The Shot heard ‘round the World.”** An account of the actions at Lexington & Concord from the official National Guard website:

In the early hours of April 19, 1775, Capt. John Parker was alerted to mobilize the Lexington Company of the Middlesex County Brigade, Massachusetts Militia, in anticipation of a British 700-man force that was marching to Concord to capture provincial arms. By 2 a.m. Parker had mustered his company on the Lexington Green. The Lexington Company of militia was typical of the period. The youngest militiaman was 18, the oldest 63; eight fathers and sons served together. Most were farmers, while some were veterans of the French and Indian War. Just after sunrise Parker and his 77 militiamen stood in defiance of the British advance guard. **"Stand your ground," Parker ordered. "Don't fire unless fired upon. But, if they want to have a war, let it begin here."** Maj. John Pitcairn, commander of the British advance guard, ordered the militiamen to lay down their arms. Realizing that his company was outnumbered, Parker ordered his men to disperse. **As the militiamen began to break ranks, a British officer fired his pistol. Without orders, the British troops opened fire.** Although greatly outnumbered, the militiamen returned the fire. The battle went on for several minutes, all around the Green. When it was over, eight Americans lay dead and nine were wounded. The British quickly resumed their march. Later that morning, Capt. Parker reorganized his unit and marched to Concord. The Lexington Company would later fight in the Battle of Bunker Hill and form a company for service in the Continental Army. However, few of its members on that fateful April morning realized that the Battle of Lexington would lead to the Revolutionary War and American independence. The Lexington Company and the Middlesex County Brigade are perpetuated by the 181st and 182nd Infantry Regiments, Massachusetts Army National Guard.

<https://www.nationalguard.mil/Resources/Image-Gallery/Historical-Paintings/Heritage-Series/Stand-Your-Ground/>

**SAMUEL RUTHERFORD**, an influential 17<sup>th</sup> Century Scottish Presbyterian pastor/theologian whose thinking had a profound effect upon the Founders, observed that a tyrant's subjects must follow a **proper sequence** of resistance in confronting & opposing him.



1. The preliminary step: **defining & identifying tyranny**. A tyrant defined: a ruler who *habitually* acts contrary to the common good of his subjects and subverts the rule of law. Sovereigns must not rule as an arbitrary law-unto-themselves.
2. The **first movement** towards resistance against a rightly-identified tyrant: **“defense by words”** (i.e., *verbally* protesting and petitioning the tyrant to cease abusing his people).
3. **Second**, the people ought to **flee** persecution and tyranny **if—within reason—** such flight is *possible*.
4. **Thirdly**, resistance may be initially exercised by means of **passive disobedience** (i.e., nonviolent civil disobedience, such as the Colonial boycotts), and then, *if attacked*, by means of **active disobedience** (i.e., forcible self-defense).
5. Moreover, the **authorization** to resist civil magistrates could NOT come simply from the people themselves. In accordance with Rutherford's guidelines, forcible resistance required the leadership of **lower magistrates**, who, like the king, were equally accountable to both God & their subjects for the just execution of Law.

The Founding Fathers, in sincerity, believed that they were in conformity with each of Rutherford's studied ethical guidelines, rooted in the Word of God.

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**Conclusion: Ultimately, God has *blessed* the efforts of our Fathers.**

America is an historically **exceptional nation**, for a variety of reasons...

1. America is the **result** of centuries of **providential historical occurrences**...  
*Consider the rise & fall of a succession of cultures and world empires that ultimately resulted in the birth of a distinct Anglo-American civilization.*
2. America is the **beneficiary** of an astonishing number of **providential deliverances**...  
*Consider the amazing rescues and narrow escapes that punctuate the historical record of both the American Revolution and the War of 1812.*
3. America has played a great role in instrumentally fulfilling **God's higher purposes** in preparation for the coming **Kingdom Age**...
  - a) ...in **sending missionaries**, in fulfillment of the Great Commission...
  - b) ...in serving as a **last bastion** in the western world of a doctrinally sober, yet lively **evangelicalism** (e.g., in contrast to apostate western Europe)...
  - c) ...in serving as a **demonstration** to "less happier lands" of the **fruits of excellence** that are consequent to a general application of the **Biblical Worldview** (e.g., our unprecedented prosperity & freedoms, our general quality of life, etc.)...
  - d) ...in serving as a **great modern defender of Israel** and as a protector of the Hebrew people (cf., Gen. 12:3)...
  - e) ...in serving as a great **defender of religious liberty** and **freedom of conscience**...

